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SUBJECT: THE FUTURE OF LIBERIAN REFUGEES IN GHANA

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: UNHCR Representative Aida Haile Mariam told Ref Coord on March 14 that refugees were becoming more serious about repatriation, with the deadline for returning to Liberia with UNHCR assistance only 3-1/2 months away. A preliminary headcount at Budumburam Camp completed on March 2 indicated that the number of Liberians had already dropped by more than one-third to 24,350. Representative Haile noted that the GOG was only now coming to grips with the probability that 20,000-plus Liberians would be remaining in Ghana but it had not yet determined whether to offer them permanent residency or Ghanaian citizenship. End Summary.

Delays in the Liberian P-3 Program

2. (U) Refugee Coordinator met with UNHCR Representative Aida Haile Mariam on March 14 at the latter's request for a wide-ranging discussion on refugee issues in Ghana. Durable Solutions Officer Senai Terrife accompanied. Representative Haile proffered that many refugees, until recently, had not seemed to realize the benefits they would forfeit if they do not repatriate by June 30, including free transportation to Monrovia and beyond, four months of food rations, and other financial and non-food assistance. Furthermore, delays in our P-3 (refugee family reunification) resettlement program meant that most refugees would not be adjudicated until after June 30; thus, the majority of them would not learn whether they would be resettled in the U.S. until after the deadline for the promotional phase of repatriation had passed. Ref Coord advised that there were efforts underway to accelerate the clearance process in Washington. He would attempt to provide UNHCR with a list of refugees who had not passed the initial P-3 verification phase so that they would know that resettlement was no longer an option for them.

Budumburam Population Down by nearly Half

3. (U) Representative Haile shared the preliminary results of a five-week-long headcount of Liberian refugees at Budumburam Camp, located just west of Accra. With 1,000 individuals still pending final verification, the census revealed a substantial drop in the camp's population from its 2003 peak of 42,000 to the current count of 24,350. Haile explained the lower numbers as the result of resettlement, spontaneous returns to Liberia, refugees opting to live elsewhere in Ghana, and UNHCR-assisted returns. The discussion then turned to the post-June 30 situation and the stance of the GOG.

GOG Advises Refugees of Ghana's Requirements

4. (SBU) In what Representative Haile described as a watershed event, GOG officials, including the Chair of the Refugee Board, the Vice President of the National Disaster Management Organization (NADMO), and a representative of the Ghanaian intelligence service, arranged a joint meeting with UNHCR and the Liberian refugee

leadership in Accra on March 12. For the first time, UNHCR and the GOG openly discussed various post-June scenarios, cognizant of the strong probability that Ghana would still be home to over 20,000 Liberians for the foreseeable future. The GOG advised that there was a possibility that it would revoke the Liberians' refugee status. Furthermore, unless the GOG decided to implement a preferential regime, those Liberians who wanted to remain in Ghana would possibly have to obtain residence and work permits, pay taxes, and pay non-citizen prices for medical care at GOG facilities. Representative Haile said that when refugee leaders later relayed this information with the larger refugee community at Budumburam, a hush fell upon the crowd. This suggested that the Liberians had understood that their days of enjoying the limited perks of refugee status, some of them since 1990, may be coming to an end.

15. (SBU) Representative Haile said that the subject of permanent residence status for those Liberians remaining past June was no longer taboo with the GOG; however, she was less sanguine about the possibility of the GOG conferring Ghanaian citizenship. While Ghanaian law included a provision for the naturalization of foreigners, in practice, this had happened only for a handful of Lebanese. Furthermore, while various Ghanaian officials have said they would consider some kind of LPR status for the Liberians, one of the pre-conditions was that UNHCR needed to reduce the camp population. The number of refugees has, in fact, fallen significantly, but Representative Haile did not know whether the remaining number of 24,350 fell within the GOG's comfort zone. She added that refugees who wanted to stay at Budumburam and buy land faced a myriad of competing property claims. Nevertheless, she noted that at least one refugee had successfully obtained title to a small parcel.

A Tipping Point?

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16. (SBU) Ref Coord and Representative Haile agreed that the GOG and Liberians were reaching a tipping point, with the June 30 deadline for repatriation with UNHCR assistance fast approaching. Liberians had arrived at their moment of truth had arrived, realizing that their future in Ghana beyond the deadline was by no means certain. Representative Haile concurred that the GOG, for its part, had overcome its initial reticence to "pressure" refugees into making a decision on whether to repatriate or remain put. Instead, like UNHCR and the USG, the GOG now wants refugees to be fully aware of their options and the consequences for not repatriating by June 30. Representative Haile added that while the GOG preferred that the deadline be extended, Geneva was holding firm to the original timetable. According to her, the GOG was also aware that more of the ancillary costs of hosting the Liberians would be shifting from the international community to Ghana.

17. (SBU) Representative Haile mentioned that rumors of mass resettlement continued to circulate at Budumburam, with refugees associating UNHCR's recent headcount with the impending resettlement of large numbers of Liberians. Ref Coord offered to post an updated USG announcement mentioning the June 30 deadline for repatriation, the benefits that refugees who stayed behind would forfeit, and the criteria for refugees still being considered under our P-3 resettlement program. Representative Haile welcomed our support and added that UNHCR was formulating a long-term exit strategy that would entail closing Krisan Camp (after resettling a large percentage of its residents), turning Budumburam over to the GOG, and helping Togolese refugees in the Volta Region to repatriate or to integrate locally.

Comment

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18. (SBU) Representative Haile had previously advocated an extension of the June 30 deadline, but has come around to our position that this goalpost should not be moved. The GOG is finally making tentative plans for the 20,000-plus Liberians who will likely remain

on Ghanaian soil beyond June 30, recognizing that it will have to come up with a long-term solution for them. If it is to be successful, the GOG will have to involve more than just the Refugee Board, which plays a largely advisory role. The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Interior will have to tackle long ignored issues such as management of the camp's schools, clinic, and security structures. We predict that there will be some bumps in the road, but in the end, the GOG will establish some form of legal permanent residence for the Liberians that falls short of citizenship but allows them to work and live in Ghana.

BRIDGEWATER